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ABSTRACT

This digest provides information and advice for accessing information from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database, a federally funded information network designed to provide users with ready access to education literature. It describes the database, the best ways to access ERIC, the thesaurus of ERIC descriptors, and the use of Boolean logic in the database. An ERIC search planning sheet is provided and users are advised to plan their search by: (1) writing the topic in their own words, (2) dividing the topic into two or three basic concepts, (3) using the thesaurus of ERIC descriptors to locate the descriptors that best represent the concepts in the topic, and (4) combining the descriptors by using ANDs and ORs. (CR)

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ERIC DIGEST

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON DISABILITIES AND GIFTED EDUCATION

THE COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

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HOW TO USE ERIC TO SEARCH YOUR SPECIAL EDUCATION TOPIC: UPDATE 1999

By

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
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How To Use ERIC To Search Your Special Education Topic: Update 1999

Kathleen McLane and Barbara Sorensen

Have you heard of the ERIC database but never used it? Have you tried to search the ERIC database on the Internet and been confused by what you found? Have you used ERIC but wondered if you found everything on your topic? Here are some tips for new and experienced ERIC users that will help you get the most out of the world's largest education database.

What Is ERIC?

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a federally funded information network designed to provide users with ready access to education literature. Papers, curriculum and teaching guides, conference proceedings, literature reviews, along with articles from nearly 800 education-related journals, are indexed and abstracted for the ERIC database.

Although the ERIC system consists of 16 clearinghouses and several support components at various locations around the United States, there is only one ERIC database. Whether you access ERIC on the Internet (World Wide Web) or through a public library, college library, or other information center, you are searching the same database of educational information.

ERIC and Students with Exceptionalities

Currently, more than 74,000 documents and journal articles in ERIC relate to the education of individuals who have disabilities and/or who are gifted. Virtually all of these were added by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education.

What Will You Get from an ERIC Search?

The result of the search will be an annotated bibliography of the journal and document literature on your topic. After you have received and screened your search, you can readily obtain the full text of most of the materials. Microfiche or paper copies of materials are available from many ERIC service providers or from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS); and EDRS provides the full text of many documents in the ERIC database. Journal articles can be found in many libraries, and reprints can be ordered from article reprint services.

Find the Best Way for You to Access ERIC

The ERIC database is available at a number of World Wide Web sites, at university libraries, and at many public and professional libraries. If you have a personal computer and access to the Internet, you can search the ERIC database through a variety of computer networks and services like the Internet, OCLC's First Search, DIALOG Dataware Technologies, and other online services. Before you decide where to search ERIC, ask these questions:

1. How much will it cost?

You may have free or inexpensive access to ERIC, for example, through your school or college library or through your own Internet account. If not, you may have to pay for connect time on some computer systems or order a search through a search service.

2. How much of the ERIC database is available?

Some services provide access to only the most recent five or ten years of ERIC, which may be all you need. Decide whether you want to limit your search by date; remember that the database was started in 1966.

3. How long will it take?

Turnaround time can vary greatly, from a few minutes if you have direct access to ERIC on a personal computer, to several days or longer if you have to order a search that someone else will run for you.

4. How much flexibility does the search system offer?

Many different software systems are used to search ERIC. Some menu-driven search systems make it easy for a first-time user, but limit your opportunities to make changes to your search question. If you try searching ERIC and feel you cannot locate exactly what you are looking for, ask your librarian for help or call an ERIC clearinghouse.

For help in locating the ERIC resource collection nearest you, call ACCESS ERIC at 1-800-LET-ERIC (800-538-3742)

Use *The Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors*

Every one of the nearly 1 million articles and documents in the ERIC database has been given subject indexing terms called descriptors. Before you run an ERIC search, it is important to take a few minutes to find the ERIC descriptors that best capture your topic. For example, articles and documents about regular class placement are indexed under the descriptor ***mainstreaming or inclusive schools***. If you want resources about developing children's social skills, the best descriptor is ***interpersonal competence***.

Many web sites and search devices have the Thesaurus online so that you can consult it as you are searching. If you are using ERIC at a library, ask for a copy of *The Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors* for help with your strategy. (Note: If you are searching a relatively new concept for which there is no descriptor, "free text" searching is available on most systems. Free text searching means you can look for the word or concept anywhere in the abstract.)

Know Your ANDs AND ORs

Although the software used to search ERIC will depend on which system you use, all searching is based on Boolean logic. The computer creates sets of information based on the way you tell it to combine words, including subject terms (descriptors).

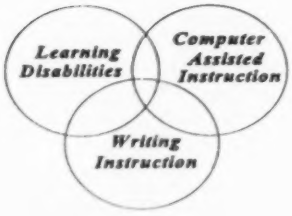
For example, if you wanted ideas on how computers can be used to improve the writing skills of students with learning disabilities, you could use the Thesaurus to find these subject descriptors:

learning disabilities
computer assisted instruction
writing instruction

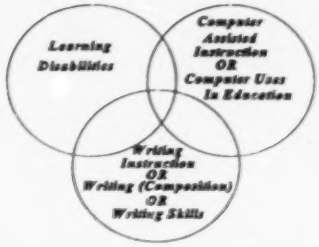
To search ERIC for records that are indexed under all three of your concepts, you would combine these descriptors with ANDs:

learning disabilities ***AND*** *computer assisted instruction* ***AND*** *writing instruction*

A Boolean diagram of your search might look like this:



If you wanted to expand your search to find additional relevant materials on this topic, you could add descriptors to your writing and computer sets using the OR operator:

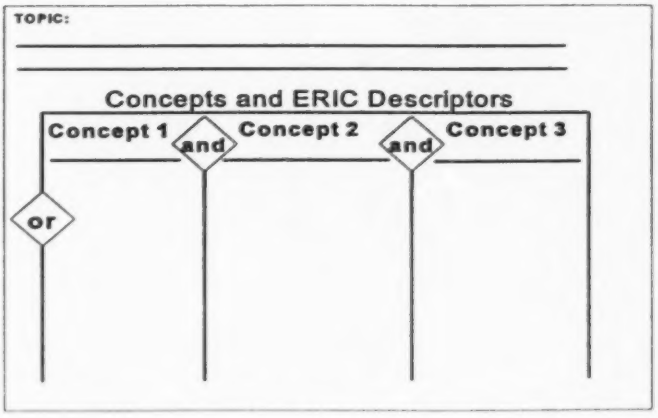

Learning Disabilities
Computer Assisted Instruction OR Computer Uses In Education
Writing Instruction OR Writing (Composition) OR Writing Skills

REMEMBER:
ORs--Expand or add more to your search.
ANDs--Limit and help focus your search.

How to Use the ERIC Search Planning Sheet

The example above shows how a special education question can be converted to a strategy for searching the ERIC database. Use the blank worksheet below to plan your search as follows: (1) write your topic in your own words, (2) divide the topic into two or three basic concepts, (3) use *The Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors* to locate the descriptors (subject terms) that best represent the concepts in your topic, (4) combine the descriptors using ANDs and ORs, keeping in mind that ANDs limit and focus your search and ORs expand your search. Note: If you cannot locate an ERIC Thesaurus, call the ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education for help (800.328.0272).

ERIC Search Planning Sheet



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